

LIVELIHOOD IN SILWA

463 an unsatisfactory basis, and even misleading in some ways as it does not agree with the facts observed in the field study. When I faced my informant, Ali, with the census, he rejected it as unrepresentative of the occupations of the people of Silwa. He quickly asserted that they were all farmers and that all their women were housewives, and that 'there were no other jobs for them'. After some computing, he added that there were about 60 shopkeepers and pedlars, all males.¹ Men (but not women) industrial workers might be those who are working at the water-pumping station, and those engaged in the sugar-factory in Kom Ombo, a town to the south of Silwa. The number of 47 masons, Ali said, was excessive, for he could count only twenty. The 36 persons working in transport could be those who were employed in the railway stations and the making of roads. He went on to say that the categories of servants, unproductive workers, and unemployed might be those who are working in towns. He emphatically reiterated that he did not know how or from where the census authorities obtained the distribution of female occupations.

Yet whatever the census may mean by this distribution of occupations, the obvious fact is that much more than 60 per cent of the population are farmers. Some of the people who could even be classified as shop and stall keepers and industrial workers or any other occupation are normally either owners of a plot of land or partly engaged in agricultural activities.²

463 Moreover, in the village there are four families of strangers. The one living on the western edge of the village is mainly engaged in carpentry such as making of doors, chests, benches, beds, and water-wheels (which was their main work before the introduction of perennial irrigation), and some farm implements. The iron implements such as the sickle and the hoe are usually made by the itinerant blacksmith who visits the village once or twice a year. The carpenter's family is known to have originally come from the Province of Kena almost fifty years ago and have settled in Silwa ever since. They have no workshop but usually work in the homes of their customers.

[323] The main occupation of the second family, living at a distance of half a mile from the village on the northern edge, is pottery. Its members provide the village with most of the pots, pans, jars, water-pots and other utensils required for everyday life. The reason for their settlement on the northern side is to be nearer to the hills and the Nile from where they can procure clay, a whitish variety, needed for their job.

465 The carpenter and the potter, as well as the barber and the blacksmith, do not usually receive their fees on the spot, but go for their round during the harvest to collect their 'customs'. Every farmer is supposed to give them some of his crops, varying, of course, according to the services ren-

• [323] ¹ Very few women pedlars come from other provinces during harvest times to sell goods to women villagers and are called gipaica.

² For a general survey of agricultural problems in the Middle East, see B. A. Keen, *The Agricultural Development of the Middle East*, London, 1946.

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dered; but everyone must give them something, even 'ten or eleven cobs of millet'. The same procedure of payment applies to the village undertaker and the man who calls the prayer-times (muazzin) and the postman. In the case of the man who leads the prayers (imani), villagers send his 'custom' to his home, besides the small amount of money he receives from the 'Ministry of Religious Endowments'. In other words, the artisans as a group are maintained by the community they serve, and are not paid by a fixed price for their results. There is an observable change in this 'maintenance basis' especially in the case of the carpenter on his making of furniture and doors. 465
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The members of the third family of strangers are Christians (Coptic Church) who mainly derive their livelihood from the income of their corn mill and who live on the other side of the railway track. They had monopolized milling for twenty years. Then four persons from the village in competition started another corn-mill. Both these undertakings later co-operated and raised the charges, and it was this that gave an impetus to the whole village last year to establish a communal corn-mill. 463
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[977]

The fourth family which has a specialized job is that of the water-carriers who are also alien to the village. They live on its western border nearer to the Nile from which they draw water to distribute in water-skins to the homes of government officials, shopkeepers, childless couples and others, when extra water is required. They are paid either in bread, corn, or money, according to what they bring, and not on a 'maintenance basis' as their comparatively late arrival in the village has been welcomed by government officials, policemen, or childless people. [312]
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Sixty years ago the first shop was opened in the village by a family called al Hudoor from Esna, in the Province of Kena.¹ Ten years later the first man from the village itself opened the second shop. At present, there are about thirty shops of varying size which have mostly started up during the last ten years. Payment for goods sold has been, more often than not, at the end of the harvest period. The shopkeepers keep an account of what customers buy, to be presented to them at this time. The same applies at present to most of the village government officials or wage-earners, who pay their bills for purchased goods at the end of the month. 443
[609]
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The market-day, held every Saturday (i.e. at the beginning of the week), is the main day for buying and selling. On this day economic as well as social exchange takes place, and it is said, 'Even to get the market's dust is better than not going to it'. Until three years ago the majority of the traders came from Edfu, the nearest town to Silwa. Retail traders, shoemakers, butchers, silversmiths, and coffee-makers come in to sell the villagers their goods, while commercial dealers buy crops, sheep, chickens and eggs. Since then, the number of traders from Edfu has diminished considerably, as a result of the increase in the number of village traders. [439]

¹ Plural of 'al Hadari' meaning coming from the town, which was the name given to them by the villagers at that time and which they still retain.

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neighbours in the field, where a small lamb or goat is killed in the field and cooked, on this occasion, by the men, while the women send the children with bread to the farm for the meal. It must be noticed that on this occasion, as well as at most communal meals, meat is served in one dish and is divided by one member or two amongst the participants. Such a meal will be followed by somebody standing up to invoke God's blessing — 'baraka' — in the new harvest, as well as mercy on the deceased ancestors. Indeed Robertson Smith's remark is applicable to this community. 'The act of eating and drinking together is the solemn and stated expression of the fact that all who share the meal are brethren and that the duties of friendship and brotherhood are implicitly acknowledged in their common act.'¹

To sum up, the village is a community of small landowners, who, irrespective of the size of their holdings, consider their land to be the basis of their livelihood and security and to be a possession for which they have great emotional attachment. There is no appreciable functional differentiation in occupations; hence, the amount of skill and knowledge required for livelihood is almost identical. In spite of a great deal of economic self-sufficiency in the peasant or rural community, and of reliance on subsistence crops, the inhabitants are still dependent on outside forces for the price of their crops and for the sale of manufactured goods and textiles. Moreover, with a population pressure, more and more of the village members have reluctantly left to seek livelihood in towns and cities and to take up work as caretakers and domestic servants. On their return to the village, such groups of people bring with them some of the town atmosphere, considering themselves 'masrawia' (been to the city). They sometimes consider themselves more refined, and are usually elegantly dressed, even adopting a different accent. Such mobility is definitely beginning to challenge in some measure the traditional stability and conventional behaviour.

In spite of the increasingly impinging forces of city life and the admiration of the villagers for city ways, the small landowners still uphold and maintain the vested common interest in favour of the traditional ways of life, symbolized in the dignity of farm-work compared to other occupations, in the importance of family unity and honour of ancestry, in the religious ethic based on contentment and abhorrence of pleasure-seeking, and in social sensitivity to shame-provoking situations.

Furthermore, the feeling of equalitarianism is so striking in this community that any schematic class-division is very difficult to apply to its social structure. Here again, irrespective of their landholdings, they all eat from their hand produce consisting mainly of bread and the same varieties of home-grown vegetables; they live in similar dwellings, built of stone, dried mud and palm trunks, constructed by the village masons

¹ W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, London, 1894, p. 263.

INDUSTRIES AND MARKETS

Women take their full share in the business of selling, and may be seen squatting on the ground, often accompanied by their male relatives, with their goods spread out before them. The market of cheese and *semn*—the latter clarified butter regularly used in cooking—is conducted solely by the women, so far as I have seen, and they bring these provisions in metal pans carried on their heads.

Large numbers of pottery water-bottles are nearly always to be



FIG. 96. A SHOEMAKER ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE MARKET

found for sale at the markets, the better ones being made at Kena, in Southern Egypt, and exported thence far down the Nile.

The tinsmith also does good business, making mugs (*kizān*, singular *kūz*), primitive lamps, and other articles on the spot, using for this purpose old paraffin-oil and petrol tins.

A shoemaker is usually to be seen squatting at work in a spot on the outskirts of the market, with a number of shoes ready for sale on the ground by his side (Fig. 96). He has an iron anvil in front of him, similar to that used by the brass- and copper-smiths, described in the first chapter (p. 32). Near by may be seated sellers of musical instruments, such as the pipe (*nāi*), the *zummāreh*,¹ and the

¹ Double pipe with a drone.

243 weeks later the stalks stand higher than a man and are laden with heavy ears. It is time for harvesting. The workers, mainly women and children, pile the stalks into heaps, and then make a first sorting, throwing on one side the ears of maize, on the other the stripped stalks. The yield of a maize crop may be ten or twelve *ardebs* to the feddan, but the average for the country is seven and a half.

The stalks are now set up on end and intertwined to make a sort of circular hedge round the heaps of ears. In this open enclosure the fellaheen work day and night to strip the ears and break out the yellow grain, bigger than peas, [342] which they put into baskets and carry home. The stalks [372] are also taken home on donkey back to serve as fuel or reinforcement for the roof. Nothing must be wasted.

C. Wheat

Wheat, on the other hand, has been since antiquity a traditional Egyptian crop. It is nowadays regaining some of the importance which it lost earlier to cotton, and is benefiting from the recent tendency towards greater variety of crops. In 1934 1,388,673 feddans were sown. In 1939 the area had increased to 1,466,000 feddans, which gave a total yield of 8,600,000 *ardebs*, or an average of 5.96 per feddan.

[262] Almost all the wheat is consumed in Egypt, by middle-
[439] class Egyptians and the people in the towns. Owing to its low percentage of gluten and record earth-content it is barely exportable, though in 1937 Germany was negotiating purchases. Europeans and rich Egyptians prefer foreign flour, mostly imported from Australia or Canada.

[312] The fellah sows his wheat in November. He pays great
[242] attention to manuring and watering up to the period of the *gaffaf*, after which he waters it only once or twice more before harvest. He harvests in April, with a primitive sickle or by hand. The crop is bound into sheaves and carried on donkey-
[492] or camel-back to the communal threshing-floor, where it is untied.

Each family in turn spreads out its crop. The *gamoossa* is brought to tread out the ears of corn spread over the ground. The poorest of the fellaheen beat their corn with
[407] their staves (*nabbuts*). More often several of them share a

consist of a red, pink or varicoloured petticoat and wide²⁹¹ coloured drawers. The *fellaha* does her own rather clumsy sewing, but the cloth is bought.

The cotton stuffs, calicos and other fabrics used for the^[439] fellah's clothing come mostly from Japan, Italy and India. Imports from other countries are becoming more and more insignificant as the Egyptian weaving industry develops.²⁸⁸ The indigo or black dyes are produced in the country, and³⁸⁶ all the clothes are made up in Egypt. *Gallabiyas* and dresses are made to measure; shirts, drawers, waistcoats and caps are ready-made. Jewish commission agents often under-⁵⁶³ take to supply the big villages with the necessary quantities²⁹² of material or ready-made clothes. The goods are sold just before the big feasts. The old wool-spinners and²⁹⁴ local weavers provide only a small part of the total²⁸⁶ supply ("").

The dullness of the women's attire is relieved by strik-³⁰¹ ing ornaments. Round the neck they wear strings of big yellow or blue beads; on their wrists a number of bracelets made, according to wealth or fancy, of glass, silver or even gold; on their ankles the *kholkhal*, a massive anklet of bronze, silver or gold, which takes the place of our wedding ring and must always be worn by a married woman. Everything else may be sold, but not this. If there is a bereavement in the family a woman lays aside her ear-rings, necklaces, and^[765] bracelets; the *kholkhal* she takes off only on the death of her lord and master. The women never wear socks or²⁹¹ stockings, but sometimes use sandals or slippers like the men.

This strikingly simple clothing betokens an old civilisation and a supple adaptability to climate and practical needs. The fellah's loose, simple clothes permit him to breathe easily and to move freely. They keep the outlines of the human form in harmony with the countryside. On the other hand, they are dark-coloured and hot — the head-dress and the women's clothes at least — so that they absorb the sun's heat instead of reflecting it. Their excessive length hinders walking and stirs up the dust. However, the advantages outnumber the disadvantages, and the habits which have retained such a costume so long unchanged show a deep-rooted wisdom.

273 as it is forbidden by his religion; he is in any case too poor to pay for it, and his head could not stand it.

272 Coffee was introduced into Egypt at the end of the fifteenth century by the Sufis of Yemen. The fellah drinks very little of it, far less than the people of Cairo("). However, when he goes to the market he may sip a small cup or two while playing backgammon with his friends.

Since the war of 1914-18, exaggerated tea-drinking, after a fashion introduced from Tripoli, has taken the place of coffee-drinking, and has become the rule not only where menfolk meet together, but also in the home. Fellah families are accustomed to drink tea several times a day, and in considerable quantity. Not only the adults, but the smallest of the children, too, feel a need for tea. The fellah takes his teapot with him to the field. The poorest spend at least 30 piastres a month on tea and sugar. When they have not enough money to buy any, they lie flat on the ground, incapable of activity. "In one village", says Mgr Khoumam, Bishop of Thebes, "I asked what had happened to the animals, which constitute the fellah's capital. There are none, they answered me. They have been sold to buy tea. Tea has become as much a necessity as bread."

By boiling the tea till it turns black, a thick, syrupy liquid is obtained, rich in tannin and alkaloids, which sooner or later ruins the stomach and the nerves, weakens the whole body, and debases the character. But it is comforting and brings forgetfulness.

● [439] This black tea has become the drug of the fellah. Imports have tripled in a few years. The Government has [65] also raised the duty to three times its original figure, from two and a half piastres to seven, and then to eight and a half piastres a kilogramme, to put it out of the fellah's reach. But the evil has not diminished, for those who have acquired the habit will do without food and starve their families rather than give it up. On the contrary the increased tax has only hastened the ruin of the fellah and of his health.

Merchants mix tea-leaves scavenged from hotels, cafés, and ships, with sawdust, bean husks, and dry *molokhiya* or poplar leaves. This mixture, coloured and baked, they sell to the wretched fellaheen, when they cannot get tea by smuggling.

Paradoxical as it may seem, there appears to be a relation²⁷² between the increase in this "drug habit" and the develop-³¹² ment of perennial irrigation. It has in fact been proved¹⁶⁴ that this invention, which has doubled Egypt's wealth, has also encouraged bilharzia and ankylostomiasis. These diseases weaken the fellah and reduce his power to work. He seeks relief in the stimulant readiest to hand. As the men, who spend their lives in mud and water, are more affected by these diseases than the women, they are also more addicted to this "black tea" (").

The cultivation of tobacco, which was brought into²⁴⁹ Egypt at the beginning of the seventeenth century, was⁴³⁹ forbidden by a decree of 25th June, 1890. Imported in²⁷⁶ the raw state from Greece, Turkey and Japan, and processed in Egypt, it is too dear for most of the fellaheen. As with coffee, it is in much greater use in the towns (").

As a rule the fellaheen eat three meals a day; at sunrise²⁶⁴ before leaving for work (*futûr*); about 10 o'clock, in the⁵¹⁶ field (*ghâda*); and at home at dusk (*'asha*). The fellaheen always sit cross-legged on the ground, and eat with their fingers.

Those at work usually eat their lunch (*ghâda*) in the⁴¹⁵ open air and in company, each taking his food from the²⁷¹ plate or enamel pot his wife has brought him, while the water bottle passes from hand to hand.

The chief meal is supper, which consists of warm cooked²⁵² food eaten with the family. Cooking is done with oil over a³⁷² Primus stove, or in a household oven fed with strawed cow-dung (*gilla*).

The fellaheen do not go in for cattle-rearing, and as meat²⁶² is expensive they cannot eat much of it. They have mutton^[231] or beef at most once a week, and at least on the two great festivals, or when an animal is killed by accident. This means an orgy, at which everyone puts away tremendous helpings of food. Every now and again some rich man,^[735] for a vow or a funeral, kills an ox or *gamoossa* and gives away its meat; then the poorest can have a feast for nothing.

Those who live on the banks of the Nile, a large canal,²²⁶ or a lake, use nets to catch small fish, which they cook in oil. But most of them are limited to vegetables. Onions (*bassal*), turnips (*lift*), green peppers (*filfil*) and cucumbers (*khiya*)⁶² are eaten raw. Vegetables which they cook are ladies'²⁵² fingers (*bâmia*) and *molokhiya* (Jew's mallow) ("), both of

39. T.—This is not quite true. Fellaheen are frequently to be seen in the Nile and in the canals, swimming and splashing about for pleasure after a hot day's work. 113
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40. T.—In 1943 the cheaper cotton stuffs were selling at a controlled price of P.T. 6 a metre, and a tailor would ask at least 15 piastres for the work. [463
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41. T.—At Akhmim and Nagada in Upper Egypt a considerable weaving-industry still flourishes. The latter has a considerable trade with the Sudan. [238]
42. Dr. Theodore Bilharz (d. 1882) was a German lecturer at the Cairo School of Medicine. In 1858 he solved the mystery of this endemic disease by discovering the parasite that causes it, and thus made attack upon it possible. [744]
43. Department of Public Health : REPORTS AND NOTES ON ANKYLOSTOMIASIS AND BILHARZIASIS IN EGYPT : Government Press, Cairo, 1924,
This work contains a complete bibliography on the two diseases, with an account of their ravages in various villages of Egypt, and of the Government's attempts to fight them.
44. Ibmnet ish-Shaty' : EL-RIF EL MASRI (THE EGYPTIAN COUNTRYSIDE), p. 125.
45. In 1935 Egypt imported 7,888 tons of coffee beans from Java, Santos and Yemen. [439] ●
46. See the ANNUAL REPORT for 1938 of the Central Bureau of Information on Narcotics. However, in a technical essay in the REVUE DES QUESTIONS SOCIALES (July 1940, pp. 94-106) entitled IS BLACK TEA HARMFUL TO THE HEALTH AND WORK OF THE PEASANTRY? the author (who remains anonymous) feels justified in giving a negative answer. [272]
47. The famous Egyptian cigarettes are all made of imported tobacco. The intention was to avoid the danger of hasheesh as well as to gratify the Turkish Government. (The smoking of very cheap cigarettes has now become extremely common among the fellaheen. - T', 1945.) [276]
48. BAMIA and MOLOKHIA are two mucilaginous plants. 241
The former, known in British colonies as OKRA, is 262